

**TUTORIAL**  
**4.15**

# Social relationships

This tutorial begins to look at relationships - what they look like, what they are based on, and how they vary across cultures.

## Introduction

In a sense, your entire life is nothing but a series of relationships with all kinds of people in a wide variety of roles. The things you are learning about culture and cultural differences are only going to be meaningful when applied in specific situations with specific individuals - as you handle relationships - both social and work-related.

## The circle of relationships

As you enter the world of social relationships in a new community, you will need to develop a good understanding of how people usually relate to one another. That will take time, as you interact and learn from the people in your new community. First, however you need to learn how relationships work on a bigger level in your own community. This exercise asks you to construct a map or chart for yourself for your own setting, showing how you relate to, and regard other people.

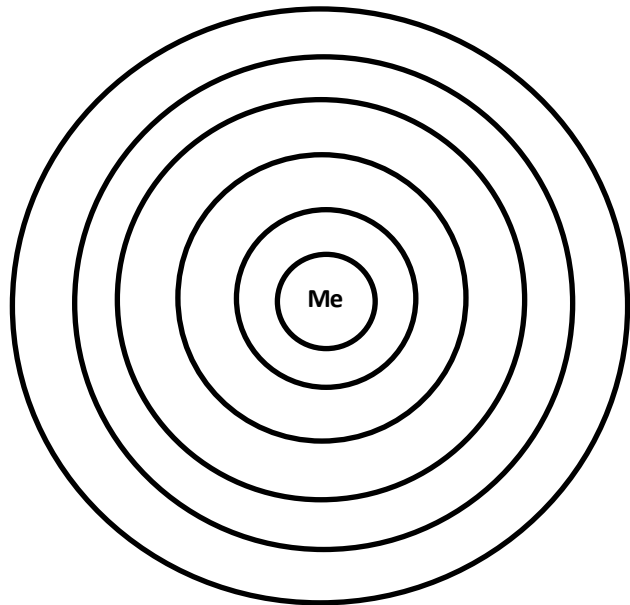
Below is a list of types of people, and a diagram with a series of rings or concentric circles with you in the centre. Draw your own circle diagram on a piece of paper, then write each type of person in one of the rings, nearer to or further from the centre depending on any or all of the following criteria:

- how closely you are involved in that person's life and vice versa;
- how responsible you feel for the happiness and well-being of that person and vice versa;
- how much of your inner life, your most private thoughts and feelings, you share with that person and vice versa;
- how much that person "means" to you.

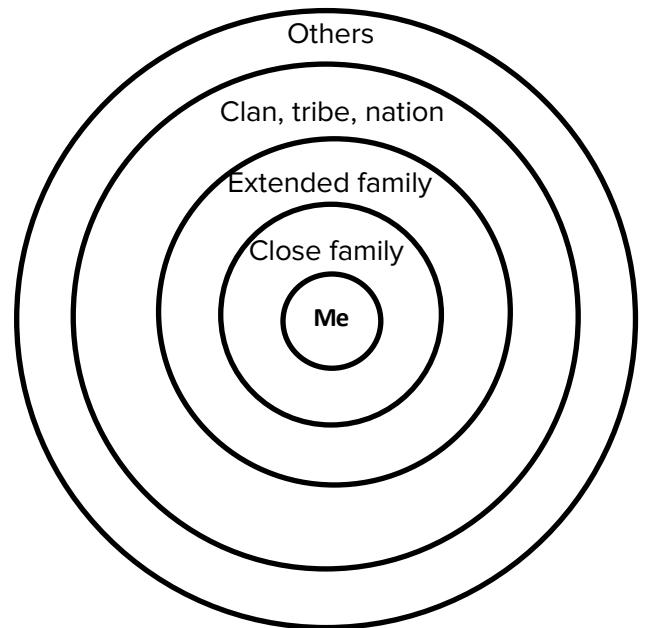
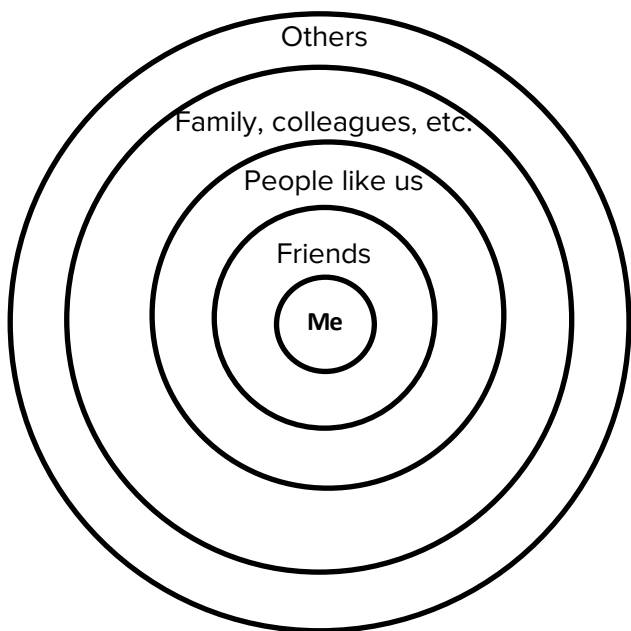
You can add other types of people and leave off any on the list that don't apply to you. Add to the rings if necessary or to draw your own chart if the placement of the rings doesn't suit you. Don't worry about being too precise: the idea is to

get a *general* sense of the personal and emotional closeness you feel toward the people in your life.

- Your parents
- Complete strangers
- People you've met once or twice
- Your brother(s)
- Acquaintances
- Good friends
- Your spouse
- Your sister(s)
- Your grandparents
- Your first cousins
- Your closest friends
- Your aunts and uncles
- Your second cousins
- Your children
- Your boss
- Your in-laws



When you have finished, compare your chart with the ones below, which are examples of how people from different cultural backgrounds would organise the general categories of people in their personal relationship chart.



The first diagram could be from a Western individualist culture, where friends are just as important as family (or more so). The second diagram is from a collectivist culture, where family and group ties determine personal and social

closeness, and friendships with others are not considered to be nearly as important.

The fact is that emotional and social distance from other people is greatly affected by culture. For example, the African idea of 'family' is large. Cousins and second cousins all fall under the heading of brother or sister, and uncles and aunts function as parents. If I was a student and wanted to study in Dakar, the assumption would be that I could live in the city with my extended family. This would also be true in many Asian cultures.

It can be very helpful for you to understand how people think about their "circle of relationships" when you are entering into relationships with people from another culture. You may make a "friend" in another culture, but what does friendship mean to that person, and is their assumption of their relationship with you the same as your own assumption?

## **Social Relationships - making friends**

It is important to learn how to develop new friendships in your own culture to be better prepared for trying to make friends in another culture. Most people just let friendships 'happen to them' without actively seeking them out - this might be OK in your own setting and culture, but when you move to a new town, new area or a new country you will have to become actively thoughtful about making friends in order to become a part of the new community.

Relationships always begin as superficial acquaintances and then in some cases progress to deep friendships. So, if your goal is ultimately to form friendships, you must start out at the surface level and from there you may eventually form a deeper friendship. Recall how your previous good friendships have started. They weren't profound at the beginning. They were superficial. And you gradually got to know your friends better. You shared more experiences. You found more common ground as time went on. You began to trust one another. That's how it works. You can't skip the superficial stage, so you might as well master that level first.

Many of the friendships you formed in childhood began before you even remember. But this is how they began. This is how they all start: first you learn a person's name and where they are from and what they do what they do for a living, or where they go to school, etc. Then you learn their interests. If you find common ground, the relationship gradually moves from the superficial to the deeper and more lasting kind of friendship.

### **How do people make friends?**

What are some of the ways that friendships are typically formed in our culture? Some suggestions (feel free to add your own suggestions to this list):

- Many people make friends at work. Open yourself up to the possibilities by participating in social occasions, such as dinners or lunches to celebrate birthdays.
- Follow your interests. For example, join a neighbourhood walking group or sporting team, a Bible study or a painting class.
- If you don't work and have no particular hobbies, consider joining a volunteer group with a charity that interests you.
- Use your existing network of family and friends to meet new people.
- When you have the opportunity to be friendly - at work, at church, any time - make an effort to be friendly and interested in other people.
- Don't turn down social invitations, see them as opportunities to meet people and develop deeper relationships.
- Invite people out for a coffee or over to your home.

### **When making friends is difficult**

Many people find it difficult to make friends. They might be shy, or feel they lack the social skills to start a conversation. Suggestions include:

- Join groups that share your common interests. Talking about one of your interests, such as gardening or writing short stories, for example, will be easier for you and can help give you confidence to talk about other things with potential new friends.
- Watch and learn from gregarious people who make friends easily. If you know someone like this well, why not ask them for some 'conversation tips' or advice.
- Practice looking people in the eye when you talk to them.
- Listen to what others are saying, rather than focusing on your own self-consciousness or your own interests.
- Actively listen and prepare a "follow-up" question to ask about what the person just said - try to get them talking about things that interest them.
- Smile.
- Look for anyone else in the room who seems socially awkward, and approach them for conversation.
- When you talk to someone new, ask them simple questions about themselves or what they like to do; it's a good way to get started.
- Social skills *can* be learned, and the more you step out of your comfort zone and try, the easier it will be next time - so never give up.

## **Romantic Relationships**

The dynamics of romantic relationships are often puzzling enough in your own culture, but even more complicated in an intercultural context. The reason we are covering it here, is that norms for romantic relationships are influenced by culture: different cultures give signals in different ways. You may be the object of someone else's interest or you may unintentionally communicate interest in another person, who then responds. It is important, then, for you to be aware of any differences between the norms governing romantic relationships in your own culture and to be aware that those in another culture may be different and may also be very subtle. This is something you will learn through time spent with people in your new community.

Think about the questions below and how you would answer them from the perspective of your own culture. Feel free to add any other questions of your own.

1. How does a man show he is interested in a woman?
2. How does a woman show she is interested in a man?
3. How does a man show he is not interested in a woman who is interested in him?
4. How does a woman show she is not interested in a man who is interested in her?
5. How do you know when the relationship is becoming something more than just friendship? What are signs that the other person is taking this relationship much more seriously?
6. What do men/women do to show they want to pull back on or cool down the relationship?
7. How much touching, embracing, and kissing is appropriate for a couple in public?

Read the incident below and think about what might have contributed to the misunderstandings that occurred.

### **Wedding Bells**

*Angela (an Australian working in India) is an outgoing, vivacious, and warm person with a ready smile. She introduces herself to people at social events and makes them feel at ease. Last week, a shy, middle-aged widower at work asked her out to dinner, and she accepted and had a pleasant evening. He asked her again this week, and while she was somewhat hesitant, she accepted again. Now, today, he has sent her a beautiful card - containing a marriage proposal. Angela, by the way, is 24 and not interested in marriage. Now what?*

What signals did Angela give that might have been misinterpreted, or what foundational cultural understandings might have been different to begin with?



## DISCUSSION POINTS

### *Social relationships*

1. The following is how a number of Australian young people responded when asked "What makes a good friend?" (from ReachOut.com)
  - someone who will support you no matter what
  - someone you can trust and who won't judge you
  - someone who won't put you down or deliberately hurt your feelings, but will show kindness and respect
  - someone who will love you not because they feel they have to because you're their friend, but because they choose to
  - someone whose company you enjoy and whose loyalty you can depend upon
  - someone who will be there no matter what your situation is
  - someone who is trustworthy and not afraid to tell you the truth, no matter how hard it is sometimes
  - someone who can laugh when you laugh
  - someone who will stick around when things get rough
  - someone who makes you smile
  - someone who can accept you for who you are, and just lend you an ear when you need to whine or complain
  - someone who will cry when you cry
  - someone who will give you room to change.

Think about the types of things that they have included and if you agree with all the points in this description. What, if anything, would you add to the list or take out of it?

2. This exercise focuses on one key aspect of friendship: the responsibilities or obligations it incurs. If the requests below were put to you by a very close friend - someone who you would place in an inner circle on the relationship diagram - what would your answer be? For each question below think about whether you would answer "yes" or "no".
  - Would you lend this person a substantial amount of money?

- Would you lie for this person in a situation where he/she was in trouble?
- Would you use your position or influence to help this person gain a special advantage over other people in getting a job in your organisation?
- Would you serve as a go-between for this person in a difficult work situation?
- Would you let this person copy from your paper on an exam?
- Would you intervene in a family or marital dispute if this person asked you to?
- Would you agree to take care of this friend's child for an extended period during a family/personal emergency?
- Would you look after this friend's house while he/she was away?
- Would you give a positive recommendation for this person if you did not think he/she would be good in a particular job?
- Would you help this person do something illegal if he/she asked you to?



## **ACTIVITIES**

### *Social relationships*

1. Make a list of the types of places you typically visit during the course of your normal life where you might be likely to meet new people. Now make another list of the types of activities you could add to your routine in order to put yourself into proximity with more new people if your goal was to meet as many new people in your community as possible.
2. During the coming weeks, actively try to meet and have conversations with people you have never met before - practicing being friendly, asking questions and finding out about their life and interests.